Adult Education Research Conference | 2015 Conference Proceedings (Manhattan, KS)

Out of Combat and Into the ClassroomHow Combat Experiences affect Combat Veteran Students in Adult Learning Environments

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Keywords: adult education, college, military, combat, veterans

Abstract: This study sought to determine how combat experience affects GWOT veterans while participating in adult education. By exploring the effects of combat veterans' experiences and the challenges they face, this study sought to learn what educators need to know about their difficulties and how it affects their learning.

Global War on Terror (GWOT)

> *"I died in Iraq. The old me left for Iraq and never came home. The man my wife married never came home. The father of my oldest three children never came home. If I didn't die, I don't know what else to call it." (Castner, 2012, p. 157)*

The Global War on Terror (GWOT) began with Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) on October 7, 2001 in Afghanistan. Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) was launched in 2003. U.S. military forces implemented a counterinsurgency strategy known as "the surge" which lasted over three years and ended on in 2010. Operation New Dawn (OND) was established to keep military troops in Iraq to advise Iraqi security forces until the final withdrawal, (DMDC-DCAS, 2013). Men and women are still returning from Afghanistan and Iraq. While some have either OEF experience and others have OIF experience, most of these combat warriors have both. And, though there are some individuals who experienced only one or two deployments, there are many who have endured eight or more deployments into combat zones.

For more than ten years these men and women lived in tents pouring sand from their boots as they lay down for the night not knowing if a rocket would make this their last sleep. They dug holes in the ground to barricade themselves so as to rest a little safer while nearby bombs shook the ground underneath. Days would pass with sand in their shirts, their socks, and their hair before having a cold shower to be clean only for a few minutes. Blood, spilled and splattered on their uniforms, would dry and become a constant reminder of the battle just fought. Day after day they wondered if they would survive.

Following the events of 9/11, more than 2.2 million men and women deployed into combat (DMDC, 2013). The Veterans Benefits Activity Office (2012) reported a total of 1,663,954 U.S. veterans deployed to the GWOT have now separated from military service. Consequent to the 2013 sequestration and budget in the Department of Defense more GWOT veterans may be involuntarily separated from their military careers (McLeary, 2012; Ricks, 2013; Maze, 2013). Regardless of remaining on active duty or separating from the military, all of these combat experienced men and women are re-entering day to day life. Nearly half will seek adult educational programs to improve their military careers or to facilitate their transition (Sitrin & Ryder, 2013). Many of these learners suffer challenges as they enter into that adult education.

This research study sought to learn how these combat experiences affect them in adult education. The purpose of this study was to learn from military veteran students how their combat experience affects them as they strive to continue their education. The primary research

question was "In what ways does Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) combat experience affect combat veteran students who participate in an adult learning environment?" This question was answered through multiple secondary questions to help us understand their experiences, the classroom effects, how it affects their assignments, reading, and memory and how they are overall changed by their combat experiences. It also sought their advice for educators.

Combat Experience in the Classroom (2013) Survey Study

A survey research model was chosen for the study that used a web-based design to provide privacy for students to independently determine their level of participation. The survey had seven focus areas: 1) Demographics; 2) Combat Experience Types; 3) Classroom Effects; 4) Effects on Assignments, Reading, and Memory; 5) Coping and Recovery Time; 6) Overall Effects; and 7) Informing Educators – an open-ended opportunity for participants to provide personal recommendations for educators to be aware of and consider when they have students with combat experiences. The overall survey received a .888 Cronbach's Alpha for reliability.

The population chosen for this research was a group of military officers attending the Command and General Staff College (CGSC). This contained primarily Army military officers at the rank of Major. Small numbers of Sister Service officers (Air Force, Navy, Marines) also responded. Most of these students have served in combat at least once with many of them having completed multiple tours. Surveys were sent to 990 students. 235 students fully completed the survey for a 24 percent response rate with a confidence level of 95 percent with a margin of error of ±6 percent.

Combat Experience Types

> *The most difficult experience for me was witnessing and caring for the children who were mangled. (Study Participant)*

Understanding the effects of combat requires an understanding of the types of combat these men and women experienced. Sixteen types of combat experiences were presented for the participants to determine how many times they had that particular experience. Eight five percent of the officers in this study had experienced a nearby explosion that could be physically felt, 63 percent had specifically experienced one or more an Improvised Explosive Devise (IED) explosions. Seeing dead bodies or human remains was reported by 77 percent and smelling decomposing bodies was reported by 55 percent while 44 percent had to handle or uncover human remains. Sixty three percent had been attacked or ambushed and 55 percent witnessed a friend become a casualty. Some witnessed the loss of several friends. Fifteen percent of them were wounded and 37 percent reported being responsible for a death.

Experiencing even one trauma during combat can lead to long-term effects. The RAND (2008) study found that "an individual who experienced five of the listed traumas is at more than 4 times the risk for both PTSD and depression relative to someone who experienced none of these traumas but who is otherwise similar in age, gender, rank, ethnicity, branch or Service, deployment length, etc." (p. 101). This study found that ninety five percent of all participants had at least one combat experience type. Without including the combat traumas provided in the open-ended responses, 86 percent of the participants in this study experienced five or more combat traumas. Thirty nine percent had a combination of more than half of the sixteen combat experience types presented in this study. Seven officers had thirteen, four officers had a combination of fourteen experiences, and one individual had fifteen of the sixteen combat experience types. Vaterling et al. (2010) also found that higher levels of stress during deployment resulted in greater increases in PTSD symptom severity after deployment.

Though this study did not seek to determine if participants had symptoms of PTSD it did seek to explore the feelings of being powerless or believing they would not survive. Half of the respondents (113) in this study reported that there were times during their combat deployment when they felt powerless. Twenty three felt powerless once, fifty nine felt powerless a few times and thirty one felt powerless several times. Thirty six officers were personally wounded/ injured in combat and 36 percent (85) thought they would never survive.

Classroom Effects

"I really can't explain it, but I'm definitely less disciplined than I used to be… It's often almost like I've developed ADD…"

(Study Participant)

Participants in this study reported feeling irritable, that classroom discussions anger them, and 36 percent of them feel emotionally numb. One third of them are uncomfortable when in class and also feel distant or cut off from classmates. Nearly half of them have physical reactions simply because something got them wound up or reminded them of a stressful combat experience. Thirty percent are easily startled during class. They are easily distracted by thoughts of a stressful combat experience and have disturbing memories of a stressful combat experience while in class. Some report there have been triggers in class that make them feel as if a stressful combat experience is happening again (as if reliving it) and 13 percent are still on alert for combat when in class. One in five is tired in class due to sleep difficulties caused by their combat experiences. Nine percent avoid class activities/situations because they remind them of a stressful combat experience.

Effects on Assignments, Reading, and Memory

Completing assignments and being able to read were among some of the difficulties experienced by these combat experienced students. Nearly all of them (83%) have to read information more than once to remember what was read and believe their combat experience negatively affects their ability to remember what they read. They have difficulty remembering what was taught in class as well. Nearly half of them forget when assignments are due and have difficulty remembering how to complete the assignment. They experience difficulty starting an assignment and their concentration is disrupted by intrusive combat memories and anxiety. Forty three percent allow distractions to interfere with completing assignments. Twenty nine percent marked true for "Though I know what to do, I can't seem to do it."

Coping and Recovery Time

There were many coping activities mentioned that can be used while attending class and some that are useful outside of class. The primary in-class coping activity is being able to take a break when something happens that causes emotional or physical reactions. They need to be able to step away from the situation and redirect their thinking in positive ways. Many use rational thinking to remind themselves that the situation may not warrant the reaction and some of them use counting or breathing techniques. While out of class, many of them have a physical fitness routine to help them exert energy and some chose relaxation activities such as music or playing with their children. Some benefit from either talking with someone they trust such as a spouse or friend and some specifically mention talking with someone who has same or similar experiences. These officers have developed multiple coping skills that get them through yet some acknowledge it is difficult at times and some days are better than others.

Though many officers may only require taking a break and going for a walk for a few minutes, some officers may need more than a few minutes and some events may take longer to recover from. Some will not be able to return to normal within a short period of time and may need more than a day. Twenty percent marked true for, "Sometimes I feel like I will never be normal again." As one officer pointed out, "What is normal? This is the new normal."

Overall Effects

> *There are times when it feels like I am watching my life from the inside rather than fully participating in it. (23% of participants)*

Seventy four percent of the 235 participants marked true for "combat has changed the way I view the world" and 72 percent marked true for "I am a different person than I was prior to combat." More than half believe their deployments increased personal stress levels and 32 percent believe their combat experience changed the way they learn. Eleven percent marked true for "my combat experiences now interfere with my participation in education." Experiencing flashbacks of a traumatic combat experience was reported by 32 percent of participants and 25 percent get angry about what happened during combat. Some have difficulty moving on with life and feel they can't relax anymore while 23 percent marked true for "there are times when it feels like I am watching my life from the inside rather than fully participating in it."

Open-Ended Question: If there are other effects not mentioned, please share them.

> *"I really can't explain it, but I'm definitely less disciplined than I used to be… It's often almost like I've developed ADD…"*
>
> *(Study participant)*

In this open-ended opportunity, some officers reported memory difficulties, such as "I am suffering from short term memory loss and sometimes I enter class and for a moment I don't know where I am" and "personally dealing with memory issues brought on by concussions." One individual wrote, "Not sure if my memory trouble is tied to my combat experience, but my memory and ability to concentrate seems to have changed since 2004 (first deployment)." One individual says, "My mind will block out information when I get stressed. I can't stop forgetting."

Three officers mentioned concentration issues such as "Cannot concentrate during lectures or when someone is speaking directly at me." One mentioned that "small sounds are annoying just as much as loud sounds" and another states that "combat experience has me wanting to do my absolute best in all my work. Any slacking in work means I may slack or cut corners in my work which can result in a soldier dying because of my mistake." Two officers mentioned that classroom discussions "remind me what I went through" and "have made the dreams come back. I had gone for a while without dreaming about stuff, but now I wake up in the middle of the night again." One mentioned that he or she "often can't relate at all to others who have not been through what I have been through."

Informing Educators

> "Don't take a student appearing to "wander off" mentally personally. We can't always control when we get a flashback or a memory." (Study participant)

The majority of participants provided statements regarding the varying types of experiences and how varying individuals respond differently to those experiences require educators to avoid over-generalizations and consider each student based on their specific

experiences and needs. The overarching message is to; know your students; talk to each person one-on-one to determine their needs, determine ahead of time what issues the student may have, and develop an efficient technique to address his/her combat experiences. Educators should have the ability to empathize with a person as needed, address each situation to the unique individual, and be aware that stressors vary from person to person.

Several participants provided educators specific things to keep in mind. First, the threshold for frustration is lower after war and certain discussions regarding ethics, death, or the requirement to talk about their combat experiences may incite personal emotions. Some students explained that comments or remarks made by people with no experience are bothersome and that the tone they express their opinions in can trigger hostility. Additionally, it is important to realize that there are good days and bad days. More breaks may be needed to help them get through the bad days or they may not show up at all. "The ability to step out when flashbacks occur" is important. And though it is helpful "to get the opportunity to walk out of class during a difficult subject" it is also helpful to provide a new direction for the class so that when they return the situation causing the trigger is changed.

The stress that deployments placed on their families adds to the stress they endured in combat. They see their time as valuable and don't respond well to the demands of sitting through a class they don't consider meaningful. They recommend explaining why things are important and then leave it to them, as leaders and adults, to make the decision. Also remember that they are often seeking ways of applying the knowledge being taught to their job/soldiering/combat/ leadership. They want to know the 'so what' of a subject so they can apply the information to them. These soldiers are self-directed learners capable of determining what is or isn't important. As one student explained, "I will tell you that fear tactics don't work with combat vets."

They enter a classroom with unique experiences that have changed the way they view the world. One explained, "Since combat I look at challenges from a threat level, current threats are prioritized and addressed in sequence." Another said, "I'll never experience the rush of adrenaline like combat again and sometimes classroom time/education seems a moot point." Educators have a new challenge of exploring how combat experiences both enhance learning and inhibit learning participation. "Educators need to understand what these experiences mean to Soldiers and how it may have changed how we view events." Ultimately, one student explains that "expressing the overall value of an education on that individual is crucial to him/her remaining engaged and focused on learning vice wishing they were back in the field."

With regards to completing assignments, the students want educators to know that unclear or ambiguous assignments may quickly lead a student to anger and that instructions should be clear and concise. Some students are finding it difficult to concentrate on reading or stay motivated to provide thoughtful work rather than quick surface responses. Some students cautioned educators not to treat the combat experienced veterans like victims and instead hold them accountable for clear expectations. Several students mentioned a writing assignment that allows them to speak about their experiences would be helpful. This is consistent with Shay's (2003) discussion regarding narrative as a strategy for expressing those experiences that must be dealt with in the healing process. Many students also spoke of the positive effects of their combat experiences. These experiences "teach one the value of life (in general) and specifically the value of time. They have found their combat experiences to have shaped them and the way they view the world as positive.

Conclusions

"Understand that everyone is different. Some Soldiers bottle it up, others express it with their fellow Soldiers, and some are in the middle. Each person handles the stress of combat in their own way. Don't try to baby them, just understand and help as necessary." (Study Participant)

This study focused on a population in a military college. This population provided insight into the challenges military officers with combat experience face. The findings suggest that similar challenges are experienced in civilian colleges and universities. More than two million GWOT veterans in our communities need support. Those in particular need are those who have separated from military service. "Student veterans frequently re-enroll or enter college following active duty, and college and university officials need to be prepared to help ease their transition" (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009, p.29).

The population for this study consisted of military officers who are an average of 34-41 years of age and already possess a college education of at least the bachelor level. The findings suggest that the challenges they experience may be more frequent and more challenging for soldier, airmen, and sailors who are younger and who are beginning their college education. These younger veterans lack college experience and may require additional support. The individuals who are/were enlisted soldiers, airmen, and sailors rather than officers were also more likely to experience combat traumas while also being less prepared to cope with them.

Educational institutions across the United States have experienced growing numbers of students who are GWOT veterans. These numbers will continue to grow as more of them transition back into a life after combat. More than two million warriors have served in the GWOT. The findings of this research were consistent with the RAND 2008 and Hoge et al. 2010 studies. The 2008 RAND study suggests that more than 600,000 of them will return with varying levels of combat trauma leading to PTSD, major depression, TBI, or potentially all three. Using the anticipated 41.9 percent calculation of veterans who will attend a college or university determined by Hermann, et al. (2009), the adult education community can anticipate a growing number of students with significant lingering issues resulting from their combat experience. It is important that faculty understand the characteristics of these adult learners and how their experiences shape classroom interactions. "In addition to increasing the diversity desirable in any student body, the veteran population brings a rich and unique set of experiences to the classroom" (Hermann et al., 2009, p. 174).

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